Rapid Activation of the Cardiac Ryanodine Receptor by Submillisecond Calcium Stimuli

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Abstract

The local control concept of excitation–contraction coupling in the heart postulates that the activity of the sarcoplasmic reticulum ryanodine receptor channels (RyRs) is controlled by Ca\(^{2+}\) entry through adjoining sarcolemmal single dihydropyridine receptor channels (DHPRs). One unverified premise of this hypothesis is that the RyR must be fast enough to track the brief (<0.5 ms) Ca\(^{2+}\) elevations accompanying single DHPR channel openings. To define the kinetic limits of effective trigger Ca\(^{2+}\) signals, we recorded activity of single cardiac RyRs in lipid bilayers during rapid and transient increases in Ca\(^{2+}\) generated by flash photolysis of DM-nitrophen. Application of such Ca\(^{2+}\) spikes (amplitude ~10–30 \(\mu\)M, duration ~0.1–0.4 ms) resulted in activation of the RyRs with a probability that increased steeply (apparent Hill slope ~2.5) with spike amplitude. The time constants of RyR activation were 0.07–0.27 ms, decreasing with spike amplitude. To fit the rising portion of the open probability, a single exponential function had to be raised to a power \(n \sim 3\). We show that these data could be adequately described with a gating scheme incorporating four sequential Ca\(^{2+}\)-sensitive closed states between the resting and the first open states. These results provide evidence that brief Ca\(^{2+}\) triggers are adequate to activate the RyR, and support the possibility that RyR channels are governed by single DHPR openings. They also provide evidence for the assumption that RyR activation requires binding of multiple Ca\(^{2+}\) ions in accordance with the tetrameric organization of the channel protein.

Key words: cardiac muscle • sarcoplasmic reticulum • ryanodine receptor • calcium signaling • gating model

Introduction

In mammalian heart, the process of excitation–contraction (E-C)\(^1\) coupling is mediated by calcium-induced Ca\(^{2+}\) release (CICR, Fabiato and Fabiato, 1979; Bers, 1991; Stern and Lakatta, 1992). It has been postulated that Ca\(^{2+}\) entering through single L-type Ca\(^{2+}\) channels (dihydropyridine receptor channels, DHPRs) locally controls the activity of the release units, composed of Ca\(^{2+}\) release channels/ryanodine receptors (RyRs, Cannell et al., 1995; López-López et al., 1995; Santana et al., 1996; Shorofsky et al., 1998) located in the membrane of the sarcoplasmic reticulum (SR) across a 20-nm wide junctional gap. Single DHPR activity is characterized by brief openings (~0.2 ms) separated by relatively long closures (~10 ms, Rose et al., 1992). When the channel opens, Ca\(^{2+}\) in its vicinity immediately rises to levels above 10 \(\mu\)M; when the channel closes, the local Ca\(^{2+}\) gradient dissipates rapidly (microseconds) due to Ca\(^{2+}\) diffusion away (Simon and Llinás, 1985; Stern, 1992a; Naraghi and Neher, 1997; Soeller and Cannell, 1997). Thus, according to the local control concept of CICR, the physiological trigger of calcium release must be a rapid and transient elevation of Ca\(^{2+}\) to above 10 \(\mu\)M lasting <0.5 ms.

The gating properties of the RyRs have been studied after reconstitution of the channels into lipid bilayers. All these studies have been performed under stationary Ca\(^{2+}\) conditions (Rousseau and Meisner, 1989; Ashley and Williams, 1990; Chu et al., 1993; Sitsapesan and Williams, 1994; Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1995; Copello et al., 1997), or during sustained changes in Ca\(^{2+}\) produced by photolysis of “caged calcium” (Györke and Fill, 1993; Györke et al., 1994; Valdivia et al., 1995; Zahradníková et al., 1999a) or mechanical solution exchange (Schiefer et al., 1995; Sitsapesan et al., 1995; Laver and Curtis, 1996; Laver and Lamb, 1998). These studies, although yielding important information on channel behavior, do not reveal how the RyR responds to the brief Ca\(^{2+}\) stimuli that are likely to initiate E-C coupling in vivo.

In the present study, we used the photolabile Ca\(^{2+}\) chelator DM-nitrophen (DMN) to produce brief Ca\(^{2+}\) elevations that mimic the waveform of Ca\(^{2+}\) changes associated with openings of single DHPRs. Photolysis liberates Ca\(^{2+}\) from the DMN-Ca complex much faster then free DMN binds Ca\(^{2+}\) (Zucker, 1993; Ellis-Davies et al., 1996; Escobar et al., 1997). Thus, Ca\(^{2+}\) released from the photo...
tolyzed DMN will be free for some time until it rebinds to unphotolyzed DMN, producing a brief (<1 ms) Ca\(^{2+}\) overshoot. Our results show that application of such brief "Ca\(^{2+}\) spikes" to RyR channels in bilayers results in rapid and transient activation of the channels. The probability that a single RyR will be activated is determined by the amplitude and duration of the Ca\(^{2+}\) trigger signal. These results support the possibility that activation of release units is triggered by single DHPR events, and that DHPR–RyR coupling can be the subject of physiological modulation and pathological failure.

**METHODS**

Bilayer Experiments

Heavy SR microsomes were prepared from canine left ventricles by standard procedures (Dettbarn et al., 1994). Single SR Ca\(^{2+}\) release channels were reconstituted by fusing heavy SR microsomes into planar lipid bilayers as described previously (Györke and Fill, 1993; Györke et al., 1994). The experimental solution contained 400 mM Cs\(\text{CH}_{3}\text{SO}_{4}\), 10 mM CsH\(\text{EPES}\), and 1 mM glutathione, pH 7.4. The bilayer chamber was designed to minimize the background current noise during recordings with high temporal resolution. The bilayer aperture had a diameter of 0.1 mm, resulting in bilayer capacitance of 50–70 pF. Single-channel currents were measured using a patch-clamp amplifier (Axopatch 200A; Axon Instruments), filtered at 2–10 kHz, and digitized at 5–100 kHz. Data acquisition using a patch-clamp amplifier (Axopatch 200A; Axon Instruments), and Origin (version 5.0; Microcal Software). The experimental variance was estimated according to Landau and Páez (1997). Peak open probability was defined as the intersection of the Ca\(^{2+}\) amplitude and time course of Ca\(^{2+}\) fleeting evenly and instantaneously. The models that did not pass the statistical significance of differences between models was performed by \(\chi^2\) tests, according to the procedure described by Landau and Páez (1997). The values of \(\chi^2\) were determined from the sum of squares of differences between experimental data and model prediction, and from the experimental variance. The models that did not pass the \(\chi^2\) test at \(P = 0.01\) were rejected.

The apparent calcium sensitivity of peak open probability in response to a Ca\(^{2+}\) spike was calculated in Mathematica (Wolfram Research) by combining the differential equations for DMN complexation and photolysis (Ellis-Davies et al., 1996; Escober et al., 1997) with those describing channel kinetics (Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1996).

The analysis of statistical significance of differences between models was performed by \(\chi^2\) tests, according to the procedure described by Landau and Páez (1997). The values of \(\chi^2\) were determined from the sum of squares of differences between experimental data and model prediction, and from the experimental variance. The models that did not pass the \(\chi^2\) test at \(P = 0.01\) were rejected.

The apparent calcium sensitivity of peak open probability in response to a Ca\(^{2+}\) spike was described by a general equation (Eq. 1, see Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1996):

\[
p_{o}^{\text{max}} = \frac{[\text{Ca}]^{n}}{(K_{C}a)^{n} + [\text{Ca}]^{n}},
\]

**TABLE I**

The Rate Constants of DMN Complexation and Photolysis Used for Calculating the Time Course of Free Ca\(^{2+}\) during the Spike

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Constant</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambinding on rate—DMN</td>
<td>(k_{5})</td>
<td>80 (\mu)M(^{-1})s(^{-1})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambinding off rate—DMN</td>
<td>(k_{6})</td>
<td>0.40 s(^{-1})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decomposition of DMN</td>
<td>(k_{7})</td>
<td>80000 s(^{-1})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambinding on rate—photolyzed DMN</td>
<td>(k_{8})</td>
<td>80 (\mu)M(^{-1})s(^{-1})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissociation constant—photolyzed DMN</td>
<td>(k_{9})</td>
<td>3 mM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See Ellis-Davies et al. (1996) and Escober et al. (1997). *\(K_{3} = k_{9}/k_{3}\).
where $k_{ca}$ is apparent calcium sensitivity of the channel, and $n_n$ is the apparent Hill slope. In general, the apparent Hill slope may not necessarily correspond to the actual number ($n$) of Ca$^{2+}$ binding sites. Specifically, $n_n < n$ when the activation path contains a Ca$^{2+}$-independent closed state (as with our models of RyR), even if the binding sites are equivalent and independent.

**RESULTS**

**Generation of Rapid Ca$^{2+}$ Stimuli for Activation of RyR**

Single cardiac RyR channels were reconstituted at a steady state Ca$^{2+}$ concentration of 20 $\mu$M. After incorporation of a single RyR, DMN (3 mM) was added to the cytoplasmic (cis) side of the channel. The free Ca$^{2+}$ was titrated to 75–150 nM. Identical precalibrated photolytically induced Ca$^{2+}$ spikes were applied to the channel. After each UV pulse, resting conditions were reestablished by stirring the solution in the cis chamber for at least 30 s. The laser flash-induced Ca$^{2+}$ spike is too fast to be directly measured by any available method, including measurements using the fastest Ca$^{2+}$ indicators (Ellis-Davies et al., 1996; Escobar et al., 1997). Therefore, the amplitude and time course of photolytic Ca$^{2+}$ changes were reconstructed from the pre- and post-flash steady state free Ca$^{2+}$ (see methods). In 21 independent experiments, the calculated free Ca$^{2+}$ rose virtually instantaneously ($\tau_{on} = 6$–18 $\mu$s) to 9–30 $\mu$M, and then decayed with a $\tau_{off} = 106$–200 $\mu$s to a final level of 105–190 nM. Ca$^{2+}$ was elevated to over 5 $\mu$M for 0.1–0.4 ms and to over 1 $\mu$M for 0.3–0.7 ms. A typical example of such a Ca$^{2+}$ spike is shown in Fig. 1 C. The amplitude and duration of this Ca$^{2+}$ stimulus is similar to that expected to occur near a RyR channel during a single brief opening of an adjacent DHPR channel (Rose et al., 1992; Stern, 1992a; Stern, 1992b; Soeller and Cannell, 1997).

**Kinetics of RyR Response to Rapid Ca$^{2+}$ Stimuli**

We recorded single RyR channel activity in response to such brief free Ca$^{2+}$ stimuli (Fig. 2 and Table III). The required temporal resolution was achieved by recording at a sampling rate of 100 kHz and cut-off filter setting $\geq 5$ kHz. Before the flash, the channels exhibited essentially no activity. The channels responded to the Ca$^{2+}$ stimulus in $\sim$25% of the episodes. The activity evoked by DMN photolysis consisted mostly of single openings, after which the channel stayed closed until the end of the episode (Fig. 2 A). To quantify the time course of channel activity, at least 32 single channel records obtained from an individual channel were combined to generate ensemble averages (Fig. 2 A, bottom).

Channel open probability transiently increased upon photolysis of DMN. The time course of activation was best fit by a single exponential association function raised to the power $n_a$ (see Fig. 2, legend). The rising portions of $P_o$ on expanded time scale are shown in B (○) along with the fits (solid lines). At 2 kHz bandwidth, the rise of $P_o$ was relatively slow ($\tau_a = 0.22$ ms, $n_a = 1.4$). Expanding the bandwidth to 5 kHz resulted in a significant decrease in the rise time of $P_o$ ($\tau_a = 0.10$ ms). In addition, a notable delay between the application of the laser flash and the ascent of $P_o$ became evident ($n_a = 3$). Increasing the filter cutoff frequency to 10 kHz had no further impact on the observed rate of channel activation ($\tau_a = 0.09$; $n_a = 2.8$). Therefore, the temporal resolution of our measurements at 5 and 10 kHz was adequate to resolve the kinetics of RyR activation. The rising phase of $P_o$ at both 5 and 10 kHz was best fit by an exponential function with a power close to 3 (solid line), strongly suggesting that binding of several Ca$^{2+}$ ions must occur before the channel can open.
Deactivation of the channel after the Ca\(^{2+}\) spike had a monoexponential time course (\(\tau_D = 3.2 \pm 0.4\) ms). It was much slower than channel activation or the decay of the Ca\(^{2+}\) spike and was independent of the bandwidth.

**RyR Response to Transient versus Sustained Ca\(^{2+}\) Stimuli**

Previous studies of RyR activation by photolysis of DMN (Györke and Fill, 1993, 1994; Valdivia et al., 1995) showed only sustained RyR responses decaying (i.e., adapting) with a time constant of \(\sim 1\) s and displayed no brief responses demonstrated in the present study. To explore the relationship between the rapid and sustained responses, we performed measurements of RyR activity during two sequential laser flashes of equal intensity (Fig. 3 A, top). It can be seen that while the first flash elicited predominantly single openings (Ca\(^{2+}\) spike response), the second pulse triggered mostly multiple openings (adaptation response). The corresponding changes in free [Ca\(^{2+}\)] (continuous line) calculated from the Ca\(^{2+}\) electrode response (dashed line) using published parameters of complexation and photolysis of DMN (Ellis-Davies et al., 1996) are also presented (Fig. 3 A). The first flash elicited a Ca\(^{2+}\) spike followed by a small steady [Ca\(^{2+}\)] elevation; the second flash elicited a similar Ca\(^{2+}\) spike, which was followed by a steady [Ca\(^{2+}\)] elevation to a significantly higher level. The increase in steady component of the Ca\(^{2+}\) signal during successive flashes is due to a gradual increase in the saturation of DMN by Ca\(^{2+}\), leaving less DMN for rebinding of Ca\(^{2+}\) after the flash. These results clearly show that the adaptation behavior is determined by the steady component of the [Ca\(^{2+}\)] signal.

**RyR Response to Ca\(^{2+}\) Spikes of Different Magnitudes**

To further characterize the activation of RyRs by Ca\(^{2+}\) spikes, we measured RyR activity in response to laser flashes of different intensities. Fig. 4, A–C, shows channel responses to laser flashes of low, intermediate, and high intensity along with the corresponding calculated free [Ca\(^{2+}\)] spikes in a representative experiment. In this experiment, the amplitude of the Ca\(^{2+}\) spike was estimated to be 9.3, 18.3, and 27.4 \(\mu\)M for low, intermediate, and high intensity, respectively. The Ca\(^{2+}\) spikes decayed with time constants of 0.17, 0.18, and 0.20 ms, respectively. Ca\(^{2+}\) was elevated to over 5 \(\mu\)M for 0.13, 0.27, and 0.34 ms, and to over 1 \(\mu\)M for 0.4, 0.6, and 0.7 ms, respectively. As can be seen, low-intensity flashes caused channel openings only in relatively few occasions (peak \(P_0 \sim 0.06\)); increasing flash energy increased the probability of activation (peak \(P_0 \sim 0.25\) and 0.50, respectively). Interestingly, in all cases the responses were composed of isolated openings with a similar duration. The time constants of activation, determined by fitting single exponential association function...
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raised to the power \( n \) to the ensemble averages, progressively decreased with increasing the energy of the laser pulse (\( t_a = 0.27, 0.09, \) and \( 0.07 \) ms; \( n = 3.5, 2.5, \) and \( 2.4 \), respectively; Fig. 5, D–F). Similar results were obtained in five other experiments. These results are summarized in Fig. 6 F, which plots the peak \( P_o \) of the channel as a function of spike amplitude. The \([\text{Ca}^{2+}]\) dependence of \( P_o \) could be described by Eq. 1 with a \( K_Ca \) value of \( 29 \pm 1 \) \( \mu \)M and an apparent Hill slope of \( 2.5 \pm 0.2 \). The high values of the activation exponent and of the Hill slope further indicate that activation of the RyR channel requires binding of several calcium ions.

### Gating Mechanisms of RyR Channel during Brief \( \text{Ca}^{2+} \) Stimuli

To better understand the mechanisms of activation and deactivation of RyR in response to \( \text{Ca}^{2+} \) spikes, we per-

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**Table III**

Properties of the Open Probability Transient Induced by the \( \text{Ca} \) Spike

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Filter cutoff frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 kHz 2‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( t_o ) Average open time</td>
<td>2.22 ± 0.18 ms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \tau_a ) Activation time constant</td>
<td>0.34 ± 0.02 ms$^\dagger$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( n_a ) Exponent of activation</td>
<td>1.77 ± 0.46$^\dagger$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( t_d ) Time constant of deactivation</td>
<td>3.14 ± 0.85 ms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( P_o ) Peak open probability</td>
<td>0.32 ± 0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( *n = 5; \; ^\dagger n = 3; \) significantly different from the data measured at 5 and 10 kHz bandwidth \((P < 0.05)\).
formed single channel simulations using our published minimal model of RyR gating (Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1996) with two open and three closed states and one Ca$^{2+}$ binding step (Fig. 5 A, left; Table II, Model 1Ca). Similar to experimental observations, the simulated responses consisted mostly of single, ~2-ms long openings (Fig. 5 B). However, other features of simulated channel activity were at odds with the experimental data. For example, contrary to real channels, simulated channels exhibited substantial basal activity. In addition, the ensemble $P_o$ or the distribution of the first latencies of the simulated responses (Fig. 5 C) showed no delay after the Ca$^{2+}$ spike, seen with experimental data.

The excessive background activity and a lack of delay between the Ca$^{2+}$ spike and RyR activation could be ascribed again to the possibility that binding of more than one Ca$^{2+}$ ion is required to produce channel opening. Considering the tetrameric organization of the RyR, we extended our minimal RyR model by including four sequential Ca$^{2+}$ binding steps (Fig. 5 A, right; Table II, Model 4Ca). The ensemble $P_o$ generated using the extended model showed essentially no spontaneous openings before the Ca$^{2+}$ spike. After the Ca$^{2+}$ spike, it exhibited a significant delay similar to the experimentally observed behavior (Fig. 5 B). Furthermore, the first latency distribution (Fig. 5 C) yielded a peak near 0.25 ms, close to the experimentally observed value of 0.2 ms. These results suggest that activation of the RyR by Ca$^{2+}$ spikes may indeed involve binding of multiple, perhaps as many as four, Ca$^{2+}$ ions to the channel.

To further elucidate how many Ca$^{2+}$ binding steps are involved in channel activation, we carried out theoretical simulations using models with different numbers of Ca$^{2+}$ binding sites. We compared the abilities of the models with different numbers of Ca$^{2+}$ binding sites to reproduce the experimentally observed kinetics of RyR activation. This approach is illustrated in Fig. 6, A–E, for the experiment shown in Fig. 4 and for models with one to five Ca$^{2+}$ binding sites, respectively. Differences between the models were statistically analyzed by the $\chi^2$ test, applied to the whole data set of six experiments. The $\chi^2$ values were determined from the sum of squares of differences between experimental data and predictions of the particular model, and from the experimental variance (Landau and Páez, 1997). We obtained $\chi^2$ values of 17,120, 9,821, 6,712, 4,667, and 4,711 (4,510 degrees of freedom) for models with one, two, three, four, and five Ca$^{2+}$ binding sites, respectively. Models with less than four calcium binding sites have failed the $\chi^2$ test at the significance level $P = 0.01$, while models with four and five Ca$^{2+}$ binding sites passed the test and can be considered, therefore, compatible with the data. These tests strongly suggest that binding of at least four Ca$^{2+}$ ions are necessary for RyR activation.

Fig. 6 F shows theoretical Ca$^{2+}$-$P_o$ dependence curves obtained from the above series of models along with the Ca$^{2+}$-$P_o$ dependence curve obtained from experimental data. The apparent Hill slopes of the theoretical [Ca$^{2+}$]-$P_o$ relationships yielded by the models with one, two, and three Ca$^{2+}$ binding steps (0.97 $\pm$ 0.15, 1.69 $\pm$ 0.02, and 2.09 $\pm$ 0.01, respectively) were significantly different from those derived from experimental data.
Figure 4. Response of single RyR channels to spikes of different amplitude. In A–C, the flash energy setting was 45, 47.5, and 50, respectively, corresponding to peak Ca$^{2+}$ concentrations of 9, 18, and 27 µM. (Top) Time course of the reconstructed calcium spikes applied to the bilayer. (Middle) Sets of representative single channel records measured at +40 mV. The flash was applied at $t = 0$ ms (dotted lines). (Bottom) Ensemble currents constructed from 32–96 individual episodes. (E–F) Exponential fits to the rising phase of the ensemble $P_o$ (expanded scale), corresponding to A–C, respectively. The time course of activation was best described by the equation:

$$P_o = P_{max} \left(1 - e^{-t / t_a}\right),$$

where $t_a = 0.27 \pm 0.06, 0.09 \pm 0.02, and 0.07 \pm 0.01$ ms, and $n_a = 3.5 \pm 1.4, 2.5 \pm 0.8$, and $2.5 \pm 0.3$ for the ensemble averages in A–C, respectively.

Figure 5. Description of the calcium dependence of the kinetics and amplitude of the ensemble open probability by different models of RyR gating. (A–E) Superposition of the experimental channel responses (thin noisy lines; data from the experiment shown in Fig. 4) and theoretical responses of the models (thick lines): Model 1Ca (A), Model 2Ca (B), Model 3Ca (C), Model 4Ca (D), and Model 5Ca (E). (F) The relationship between the peak open probability and the Ca$^{2+}$ spike amplitude. The symbols with their standard deviations represent measured peak open probability at different levels of peak calcium during the spike. The lines represent the theoretical dose–response curves (Eq. 1) for models with one to five Ca$^{2+}$ binding sites. Labels correspond to the number of Ca$^{2+}$ binding steps in the model.
(2.5 ± 0.2) at significance levels of 0.0001, 0.001, and 0.05, respectively. Therefore, these models are not compatible with the experimental results. Models with four and five Ca\(^{2+}\) binding steps (apparent Hill slopes 2.6 ± 0.1 and 2.6 ± 0.1, respectively) were not significantly different from the experimental data even at \(P = 0.5\). Therefore, the response of the RyR to Ca\(^{2+}\) spikes can be described by our minimal model of the RyR modified by including a total of four Ca\(^{2+}\) binding steps.

### Theoretical Dependency of RyR Response on Amplitude-duration Characteristics of Ca\(^{2+}\) Stimulus

The chemistry of DMN limits flash-photolysis experiments to a rather narrow range of amplitude-duration characteristics of Ca\(^{2+}\) spikes. In contrast, the parameters of local Ca\(^{2+}\) signals associated with the activity of DHPRs vary widely. Therefore, to gain further insight into the dependence of the channel activation on the characteristics of the trigger signal, we performed simulations in response to a broad range of rectangular Ca\(^{2+}\) pulses using Model 4Ca with four Ca\(^{2+}\) binding sites described above. The properties of the Ca\(^{2+}\) pulse in the physiological range of durations and amplitudes had a profound effect on peak open probability of the RyR, as illustrated in Fig. 7. Calcium elevations lasting <10 \(\mu\)s had negligible probability to open the RyR in the whole amplitude range. To increase the peak open probability from 5 to 95%, the amplitude of the calcium pulse has to be increased by \(\sim10\)-fold for any pulse duration. Prolongation of the Ca\(^{2+}\) pulses above 1 ms was not effective in increasing peak \(P_o\) of the RyR.
In the high Ca$^{2+}$ pulse amplitude range (>10 μM), the dependence of peak $P_o$ on pulse duration was very steep for short pulse durations (0.1–0.5 ms).

**DISCUSSION**

In the present study we measured the kinetics of activation of cardiac SR Ca$^{2+}$ release channels/RyRs using fast Ca$^{2+}$ concentration spikes produced by photolysis of DM-nitrophen. The Ca$^{2+}$ spikes mimic the profile of Ca$^{2+}$ produced by openings of single DHPRs in the vicinity of the RyRs. Thus, our results show, for the first time, how single RyRs might respond to a physiological trigger signal.

Under our experimental conditions (∼100 nM resting Ca$^{2+}$ and 3 mM DMN), the reconstructed Ca$^{2+}$ spikes were characterized by an activation time constant of ∼15 μs, a duration of ∼0.1–0.4 ms (at 5 μM Ca$^{2+}$) and a peak amplitude of 10–30 μM (Fig. 1 C). Application of such Ca$^{2+}$ pulses resulted in activation of the RyR with 5–50% probability, depending on spike magnitude. The activity of RyR was characterized by isolated single openings with duration of ∼2 ms. It is important that in our experiments we used Cs$^+$ instead of Ca$^{2+}$ as the charge carrier. Besides improving the signal-to-noise ratio, this allowed us to determine the parameters of channel kinetics without potential side effects related to “feed-through” influences of luminal Ca$^{2+}$ at the cytosolic activation and inactivation sites (Tripathy and Meissner, 1996).

Previous studies using caged Ca$^{2+}$ did not yield channel activation in response to Ca$^{2+}$ spikes (Györke and Fill, 1993, 1994; Györke et al., 1994; Valdivia et al., 1995). These negative results can be ascribed to lower concentrations of the calcium cage, low time resolution of the measurements, and the presence of a laser flash artifact that could have concealed the occasional, brief channel openings in response to the flash. In the above studies, the effective trigger signal consisted of both a transient (i.e., spike) and a sustained component. The reported time constants of channel activation were 1–2 ms. Our present experiments with improved time resolution showed that rapid Ca$^{2+}$ spikes can activate the channel with much faster kinetics (activation time constant ∼0.15 ms).

We believe that our measurements yield the true response time of the channel because channel activation displayed a distinct delay, and the kinetics of the RyR response were unaffected by increasing the filter cutoff frequency from 5 to 10 kHz. The lifetime of isolated RyR channel openings induced by Ca$^{2+}$ spikes ($t_o$ ∼ 2 ms) was substantially longer than the average channel open time (∼1 ms) reported under similar conditions at steady state (Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1995). However, it was similar to the average channel open time within the high activity (H) gating mode (Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1995). The deactivation rate obtained from ensemble averages of the channel responses to the Ca$^{2+}$ spike was ∼3 ms, and it corresponded approximately to the average channel open time. These results provide further evidence for the idea that the H-mode activity is the preferred initial regime of channel operation upon activation (Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1996; Zahradníková et al., 1999a).

In previous studies with photolysis of DMN and NP-EGTA, the RyRs activated rapidly, and then the $P_o$ decayed slowly, by a process termed adaptation (Györke and Fill, 1993; Valdivia et al., 1995). It has been argued that adaptation might simply be a result of the spontaneous deactivation of the RyR after its activation by the rapid Ca$^{2+}$ spike (Lamb et al., 1994). Our direct measurements of the RyR response to Ca$^{2+}$ spikes indicate that the deactivation of the RyR after a Ca$^{2+}$ spike is too fast to account for the adaptation phenomenon. Further, our results with double flashes that induce Ca$^{2+}$ waveforms with similar transient but different steady components (Fig. 3) showed that the adaptation response is evoked only by the Ca$^{2+}$ signal with a large steady component. Thus, it appears that the type of response of the RyR (i.e., rapid or prolonged) is determined by the steady component of the photolytic Ca$^{2+}$ change.

The kinetics and [Ca$^{2+}$]$^-$ dependence of the response of the RyRs to Ca$^{2+}$ spikes could be well described by our minimal model of RyR (Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1996) with two open and three closed states modified by including three additional (a total of four) Ca$^{2+}$-dependent closed states (Fig. 5 A). We have
shown previously that the minimal model reproduces reasonably well the main aspects of channel behavior, including modal gating activity, under both stationary and nonstationary conditions (Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1996; Zahradníková et al., 1999a). This model consists of three sets of states (i.e., gating modes) connected by slow transitions. The results of our present study with improved time resolution allowed us to refine the state structure of the high activity mode corresponding to the activation path of the channel.

The existence of multiple Ca$^{2+}$ binding steps in the RyR activation path is consistent with the results of analysis of closed time distributions of steady state recordings at low [Ca$^{2+}$], yielding at least five closed states (Sitsapesan and Williams, 1994). Importantly, the four-Ca$^{2+}$ binding site model is also consonant with the molecular structure of the RyR, a protein composed of four homologous subunits with each monomer carrying at least one Ca$^{2+}$ binding site (Coronado et al., 1994).

Based on our model simulations, we suggest that the response of the RyR to a Ca$^{2+}$ spike includes the following steps. (a) Sequential binding of four Ca$^{2+}$ ions to the channel promotes transition from closed states (R–C4) to an open state (O1). The need for binding of four Ca$^{2+}$ ions to open the channel accounts for the delay in channel activation, for the negligible $\text{P}_o$ at basal [Ca$^{2+}$], and for the fact that spikes do not always cause channel opening. (b) After termination of the spike, Ca$^{2+}$ dissociates from the channel and the channel deactivates by returning first to the closed states (C4–C1) and eventually to the resting state. Transitions between states C4–O2 and O1–C2 are very slow ( ~1 s; Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1995); consequently, the probability of the channel entering these late states during brief Ca$^{2+}$ spikes is low. Thus, as we have previously predicted (Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1996), the channel has just enough time to enter the fast access states of the H-mode, but not the slow access states of the L-mode when challenged by brief, calcium spike–like stimuli. The slow transitions between states C4–O2 and O1–C2 can only occur when Ca$^{2+}$ remains elevated in the vicinity of the channel (Zahradníková et al., 1999a; Fig. 3). In this respect, our gating model could be simplified by omitting the slow access states (O2, C5, and I) and still be able to account for most results with brief Ca$^{2+}$ spikes. However, such a truncated model would clearly be inadequate for describing channel behavior in response to sustained Ca$^{2+}$ elevations when the initial passage to rapid access states is followed by a transition to slow access states, accounting for the phenomenon of RyR adaptation (Zahradníková et al., 1999a; Fig. 3). Neither would the truncated model be able to describe steady state activity characterized by modal behavior; i.e., random transitions between periods of high and low activity (Zahradníková and Zahradník, 1995, 1996).

Our results have important ramifications for understanding CICR in vivo. It has been suggested that during E–C coupling Ca$^{2+}$ entering through single L-type Ca$^{2+}$ channels locally controls the activity of the Ca$^{2+}$ release channels, presumably arranged into functionally independent release units (Stern, 1992b; Cannell et al., 1995; López-López et al., 1995; Shorofsky et al., 1997). One important premise of the local control theory is that the RyR must be fast enough to track the fast Ca$^{2+}$ changes associated with single DHPR openings (see introduction). The results of the present study show that brief (~0.5 ms) trigger Ca$^{2+}$ signals are adequate to activate RyRs and are consistent with the possibility that RyR channels are controlled by single DHPR events. Such rapid activation could also provide a means for effective cross-activation of neighboring Ca$^{2+}$ release channels within a single release unit, thus accounting for the synchronization of multiple RyRs during a Ca$^{2+}$ spark (Bridge et al., 1999). At the same time, the presence of four Ca$^{2+}$ binding sites that must be occupied for channel opening would tend to reduce activation by global background Ca$^{2+}$ while still enabling the local Ca$^{2+}$ increase in the diadic cleft to activate the channels efficiently (Stern, 1992b; Stern et al., 1999).

We showed that Ca$^{2+}$ spikes with an estimated amplitude of 10–30 μM, which mimic single DHPR-related signals, have a 5–50% probability of inducing RyR activation. The results of our simulations in a wider range of amplitudes and durations of the Ca$^{2+}$ elevations demonstrate that the probability of activation of a single RyR is graded with the amplitude as well as duration of the triggering Ca$^{2+}$ pulse. These results are consistent with a DHPR–RyR coupling arrangement that could be the subject of physiological modulation and pathological failure in the heart (Gomez et al., 1997). The relatively low efficiency of activation of single RyRs by brief Ca$^{2+}$ stimuli could also reflect the importance of clustering of RyRs in the junctional gap, which would be expected to improve responsiveness of the RyRs (Cannell and Soeller, 1997). While our data suggest that the lower and shorter Ca$^{2+}$ elevations produced by DHPR openings trigger RyR activation with a relatively low probability, the resulting longer RyR openings of higher amplitude can be expected to activate the neighboring RyRs with a much higher probability, giving rise to the stereotypical spatio-temporal shape of a calcium spark (Cannell et al., 1995; López-López et al., 1995; Bridge et al., 1999).